**Rascaroli, Laura. 'James Baldwin's Embodied Absence: *I Am Not Your Negro* and Filmic Corporeality'. *I Am Not Your Negro: A Docalogue,* edited by Jaimie Baron and Kristen Fuhs, Routledge, 2020, pp. 24–37. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429058301-3**

**Accepted version**

> Why, then, a body? Because only a body can be cut down or raised up, because only a body can touch or not touch. A spirit can do nothing of the sort. A "pure spirit" gives only a formal and empty index of a presence entirely closed in on itself. A body opens this presence; it presents it; it puts presence outside of itself; it moves presence away from itself, and, by that very fact, it brings others along with it.[1]

On May 13, 1975, artist Fabio Mauri's installation *Intellettuale* (*Intellectual*) took place on the steps outside the Modern Art Gallery of Bologna on the occasion of its inauguration. Poet, writer, and director Pier Paolo Pasolini sat on a chair in front of the audience, clad in a white shirt, while his film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (*Il Vangelo secondo Matteo*, 1964) was projected onto his torso. The photographs of Mauri's installation by Antonio Masotti show Pasolini's darkened silhouette, the bright images of the film turning his chest into an incarnate screen [Fig. 1]. As Giacinto Di Pietrantonio has written of the installation,

> The art of Mauri who, like Pasolini's, has a religious weight beyond the dogma, shows Pasolini's sacred body in the dark, mystically lit only by the light of the projection, a "radiograph of the spirit" of the poet's body which, shortly thereafter, will be sacrificed on the beach of Ostia, ending the life of the dissenting intellectual, radically active in condemning state powers. For Mauri, the artist is an intellectual in the Benjaminian sense, for he is not the one who appears romantically alone and lost in the face of the power of the world, but he who has responsibilities towards the world itself and participates in the world.[2]

Although the idea of a radiograph of the artist's spirit is evocative, the photographs, I would argue, are more strongly suggestive of the corporeality of Pasolini's cinema, and of its

inscription onto the authorial body, which bears his film like a cross. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* has often been seen in light of its autobiographical overtones, including Pasolini's desire to have Christ played by a famous poet as a sort of stand-in for himself (Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Jack Kerouac were both considered), and the casting of his mother Susanna as the older Virgin Mary.[3] Pasolini, furthermore, notoriously characterized himself in a Christ-like manner in some of his work, especially the poem "La crocifissione" ("The Crucifixion").[4] In spite of declaring himself not a Catholic, he identified with Jesus as the ideal embodiment of a "scandalous" mode of existence, characterized by protest and resistance to power. Pasolini's controversial figure was at once an object of fascination and of abhorrence for his contemporaries. John Di Stefano has noted that, "[c]aught somewhere between revulsion and fascination, Italians developed an obsession with Pasolini's body,"[5] at a time when the queer body was vehemently repressed and reviled in Italian society. Pasolini's strategy in his oeuvre, and beyond it, responded to his choice of making recourse "to the essential signifier of an 'authentic' body as a public locus of discourse, in response to the exclusion from discourse and from narrative sexual ideologies."[6]

I have evoked Pasolini's foregrounding of himself both as a "public locus of discourse" and as the embodied screen in Fabio Mauri's *Intellettuale* to begin to flesh out the "filmic body" of Raoul Peck's *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016). James Baldwin's deliberate deployment of his own body as an arena for debate beyond his oeuvre, i.e. in his lectures and interviews and on televised debates, bears more than a similarity with Pasolini's textual and extratextual strategies — and is also central to Peck's film and its argument. My interest here lies in understanding *I Am Not Your Negro* as an essay — as a work that articulates its argument filmically, rather than exclusively through verbal intelligence — and in showing how this filmic argument, which is inherently political, arises gradually from a complex corporeal discourse. *I Am Not Your Negro*, indeed, deals extensively with the body and images of bodies. These include the bodies of the three heroes/martyrs of the civil rights movement, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., all killed in the course of five years, from 1963 to 1968; those of slaves, who are pictured in archival images while working, entertaining, suffering, dying, decomposing; and those – defiant and terrified, rebellious and brutalized – of demonstrators and victims of civilian and police racial violence in the US, both in the past and today. More relevantly to my point, *I Am Not Your Negro*'s argument is built on the plurality of the body: the body as physical substance and as imaginary projection, as intimate reality and as social construct, as materiality and as metaphor. "Which body? We have several,"[7] epigrammatically asked Roland Barthes in his

autobiography. For both Baldwin and Pasolini, then, the discourse of identity is an embodied and autobiographical political discourse. Gesturing already from its title to an autobiographical field, to a denied identity, and to a scandalous body politics, *I Am Not Your Negro* draws on Baldwin's textual discourse on the body and extra-textual deplyoment of his own body; but it also uses filmic means to transform his body into cinematic argument — into a screen onto which a racialized projection is invited from the audience. This transformation takes place in the very last sequence, but it builds on a complex strategy that unfolds throughout the film.

In 1979, James Baldwin wrote a letter to his agent Jay Acton describing his plans for a book which would recount the lives and deaths of his friends Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.. Peck's documentary takes its lead from this letter, and from Baldwin's unfinished essay/memoir, *Remember This House*, a book that he found it impossible to write, and of which he completed only thirty pages before his death in 1987. It also draws passages from Baldwin's memoir *No Name in the Street* (1972) and from *The Devil Finds Work* (1976), his brilliant critique of Hollywood cinema. All of these adapted essayistic passages, voiced by Samuel L. Jackson, are intertwined with footage of Baldwin himself, lecturing or participating in televised debates. The eloquent, lucid, charismatic speech of James Baldwin, thus, subtends and supports the entire film. *I Am Not Your Negro*, however, speaks with its own essayistic voice too.

*I Am Not Your Negro*'s argument is characterized by an epic scope, which can be summarized through Baldwin's statement, spoken in the film by Jackson, that "The story of the Negro in America is the story of America. It is not a pretty story." In other words, Peck's film takes on and corroborates Baldwin's contention that the history of blacks is not part of American history; it *is* American history. By disconnecting the two, or by subordinating one to the other, in dominant historical narratives, what is lost is a deeper understanding of America as a country, of its roots, its culture, its politics — and of its present too. The film, accordingly, sets out to show how, in North American history, the "Negro" body is marked by the invisibility to which the white society condemned it: it is concealed and negated, at once as a human body, as a suffering body, and as a sexual body. At the same time, it is the site of an almost archetypal fantasy that, Baldwin argues, is essential to the construct of whiteness: that of the "Nigger." The mental image of the "Nigger" for Baldwin gives rise to certain other images that neutralize it, such as the innocuous, submissive "Negro," as well as to an overwhelming number of media-fabricated images that present the US and the

American dream as inherently white. Through extensive use of archival material illustrating and supporting the voiceover's critique, *I Am Not Your Negro* shows how, over the decades, an endless series of images from television, film, and advertising – many of which relied on the boldness of Technicolor – cancelled out the reality of Black America. An ample range of cultural and commercial products is covered by the film to demonstrate and illustrate Baldwin's points. The history of Hollywood is represented, from early film to classical westerns, from musicals to Doris Day films. Characters of color are shown to have been either entirely absent from the screen or reduced to vicious enemies to be eradicated (like the Native Americans in classical westerns), lazy types, or one-dimensional servants and entertainers. Baldwin's critique of later films with Black main characters and stars such as Sidney Poitier, including *The Defiant Ones* (1957), *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), shows that, "[a]lthough these films were widely praised for their supposedly liberal racial politics at the time of their release, […] they further entrenched unequal relations between blacks and whites."[8] As Baldwin argued in his writings, these films ultimately were about reassuring white spectators about their own innocence and ensuring they could preserve their self-image.

To a great extent, then, the film's argument coincides with Baldwin's argument, as unfolded through his work and interviews, and its essayistic logic and eloquent force are those of Baldwin's prose and speech. However, *I Am Not Your Negro* does more than simply reproduce Baldwin's words and illustrate them. If the Black body is obliterated, erased, and absent from the image of American society, then it follows that a Black body needs to be summoned, reconstructed, and reincarnated, precisely in order to reveal its lack. *I Am Not Your Negro* aims to do so via a number of strategies. At a most immediate level, the film presents us with an abundance of images of Black bodies to contrast their absence from white-dominated media and public discourse. These images include those of Baldwin's friends Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lorraine Hansberry, and of their friends and families. Through the lens of Baldwin's address to his agent and his reader, these people are conjured beyond their historical significance or iconic status; they are re-presented in flesh and bones, so to speak, in their humanity, their character, their lives and relations, their physical features (the tone of their voice, how they stood, how they laughed, how they pronounced a specific word), and not just as historical symbols of a political and civil struggle. Lesser-known figures too are brought into focus: those who stood up for their rights, demonstrated in the streets, on buses, on their way to school, and just dared to exist. The film also presents us with many images of violated bodies — enslaved, threatened, humiliated,

wounded, murdered. Among them are the images of the corpses of Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., of their funerals and their mourners, but also descriptions of where and how Baldwin learned about their deaths, and the resulting physical anguish he experienced. Peck also goes beyond Baldwin's lifespan, and summons for us more recent images of violence, which we have witnessed on television since the early 1990s, and now through our mobile media — from Rodney King's videotaped beating to more recent police brutality captured by citizens' mobile phone cameras and widely shared via the Black Lives Matter campaign. This move of the film bolsters Baldwin's long view of "the story of the Negro in America" in its historical significance, and connects the bodies of recent victims to those of the earlier Civil Rights and Black Power movements, all the way back to those of slaves working and dying in cotton plantations. In so doing, the film historicizes contemporary events, by placing them in a continuum; equally, it actualizes historical events, by showing that the past is not past — to paraphrase William Faulkner.[9]

Through archival images and Baldwin's own commentary, therefore, we are exposed to the reality of Black lived experience in American history, through to our day. The ideological nature of images of "the Negro" that dominated the media since the origins of the cinema is exposed and decried. One point at which this becomes eminently tangible through filmic form, rather than verbal commentary, is the sudden transition from a glittering romantic sequence in the Doris Day film *Lover Come Back* (1961) to graphic photographs of lynched bodies. The visual shock produced by the jump cut exposes the extraordinary violence concealed in the alluring obfuscation of the Hollywood dream, and is remindful of some of the most radical montages and superimpositions in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1989–1999), Jean-Luc Godard's video essay on a century of imbrication of cinema and history.

While *I Am Not Your Negro*'s most evident strategy as regards its discourse on corporeality is that of embracing and illustrating Baldwin's own argument on the effacement of real black bodies and their ideological obfuscation, Peck also goes beyond it, by working with and via James Baldwin's own body in the film. Here too, to an extent, the film straightforwardly echoes Baldwin's strategies — but also takes them further. Baldwin's real body, as already discussed, is present in the film through still photography and footage of his lectures and his participation in televised interviews and debates. The latter best reveal Baldwin's corporeal strategy, where his own body becomes a provocative instrument of signification and of denunciation. The centrality of embodiment to Baldwin's thought is evident when reading his oeuvre, and is perfectly encapsulated by the following statement of his: "Within the body of the Negro press all the wars and falsehoods, all the decay and

dislocation and struggle of our society are seen in relief".[10] The body, then, is right at the center of Baldwin's historical critique, and of his essayistic design too. Baldwin's core aim in his essay work, which the film brings into relief, is to summon the effaced and mystified body of the "Negro." In the excerpts of televised interviews included in the film, Baldwin uses his own body to do just that. Sitting in the TV studio, he holds himself as irrefutable material presence. On the one hand, his body – singular, connoted, self-possessed – is a "body of evidence"; it testifies to the existence of real men and women, who have been removed from the public eye. On the other hand, it is a resolute, resisting body, which stubbornly refuses to reflect back the reassuring persona of "the Negro" (intended as the innocuous, submissive "Uncle Tom" figure that was depicted as happy with his place in white America), in spite of the significant advances that "the Negro" has made in American society, as interviewers point out to him, quite overtly reproaching him for his "unhappiness" and anger. Baldwin's stance in these interviews is to present a body of resistance, and to shatter misconceptions, reflecting his thought that "the Negro has never been as docile as white Americans wanted to believe. That was a myth. We were not singing and dancing down on the levee — we were trying to keep alive; we were trying to survive. It was a very brutal system. The Negro has never been happy in his place".[11]

The film's key achievement, however, is to evoke (without completely actualizing) the fullness of Baldwin's body. This happens through filmic means, by the introduction of a voiceover. It is the voiceover that, with its own "body," takes the fragmented image of Baldwin and gives it flesh. Such flesh is, of course, filmic; yet, not only does this not detract from its impact on the film's argument, but it is its force. As a documentary, *I Am Not Your Negro* carries out a historical/biographical work of testimony and assemblage, and is a vehicle for Baldwin's ideas; as an essay, it suggests a corporeal fullness to Baldwin's textual fragments by giving them a filmic voice. This fullness is the site of a productive ambiguity that demands exegesis.

Baldwin's voice is indeed present in the film, audible in the footage of his public performances. But the film adds a second voice, performed by Samuel L. Jackson. It is significant that at least one critic deemed that Jackson here "gives his best performance in more than a decade."[12] Comments such as this reflect the importance of the voiceover in the film, which has been credited with giving "fresh voice"[13] to Baldwin. For another critic, the voiceover makes of Baldwin a "quiet, meditative presence"[14] throughout the film. But the voiceover, I argue, is not just there to make Baldwin present, "fresh," or current. While the film's voiced contents come directly from Baldwin's essayistic writings (in which,

incidentally, he most frequently adopted a first-person narrator), the voice itself also signifies. Voice's autonomy from signification, argued by theorists including Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, makes space for the purely sonorous, for the bodily element of the vocal utterance, for the Barthesian "grain" of the voice.[15] This grain testifies to a displacement. If the filmed excerpts included in *I Am Not Your Negro* give us glimpses of Baldwin's public persona (and of his voice), the voiceover narration, with its personal address, intimate tone, and confessional attitude, suggests human fullness and embodied subjectivity; it evokes the man, and the essayist at the same time. The voice of Jackson's voiceover, however — and this is crucial — gestures to an embodiment by its absence. In a short text published in the book that accompanied the release of the film, editor Alexandra Strauss, referring to her work on the film and the role of the voiceover in the edit, remarks precisely on this absence, and on the impossibility of resurrecting Baldwin, when she asks:

> How do we connect a narrating voice that obviously could not be Baldwin's with the real footage of him speaking so eloquently? How could we achieve a discursive continuity between these two elements?[16]

Strauss leaves her question hanging, because the answer is that continuity is not achievable. In Barthesian terms, the grain "is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."[17] And it is the grain that provides us with "the image of the body (the figure)."[18] The highly distinctive, performed, "raspy, hushed"[19] grain of Jackson's voiceover gives us a figure; it is iconogenic,[20] to use Michel Chion's term, for it impels us to figure an embodiment; it mediates a bodily image. As such, it is at once an index of presence (for we always perceive a voice as emanating from vocal organs, even when we do not see a body), and of misalignment and lack — those of the body of Baldwin, whose materiality is here mediated at once by discourse and by the grain of another man's voice. The voiceover, as a distinctly filmic device, is a body as it voice-performs, but here it also conjures up, and points at, the missing body of James Baldwin. Its ontological status is, therefore, profoundly ambiguous. It is an allusion and a displacement, and its ambiguity is further compounded by its difference from, and similarity with, James Baldwin's actual voice, which is also audible in the film. Jackson's voiceover, in this sense, is more than a narrative stratagem to convey Baldwin's thought, or a way to make him "fresh." If, on the one hand, it makes him more present, on the other hand it makes a figure of him, in Barthes' sense: filmic flesh. And, in so

doing, it creates the conditions for the film's most powerful argument, which is so central to the film to be encapsulated in its title.

This argument comes to fruition in between two bodies. As an actual, historicized body, Baldwin's appearance in the televised debates denounces the lack of true-to-life images of Black people on TV and other screens. As filmic flesh — a figure in the film, at once present and absent, image and *acousmêtre* — he becomes the *possibility* of an embodiment. This possibility, this sheer potentiality allows it to expose the psychological processes of projection, which in film are often quite literal, and according to which the ego "projects" an id impulse out of a person and onto an other (here, a racialized other). This is nowhere more powerful than in the last sequence, in which Baldwin holds himself firmly before the camera and directly addresses his white TV audience:

> What white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I'm a man. If I'm not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him, then you have to find out why. And the future of the country depends on that. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.

Shot in close-up, the sequence is nonfictional, but it could just as easily be fiction, given the radical, Godardian flatness of the image, further compounded by the abstraction of the black background and the central fixity of the camera, the swirls of cigarette smoke metafilmically revealing the gap between the lens and the profilmic [Fig. 2]. Coming right at the end of the film, it draws on all our accumulated knowledge of Baldwin's body, on all its forms and meanings. Oscillating between image and materiality, figure and man, and exploiting the power of the screen as a compelling site of identification, Baldwin looks straight into the lens. Occupying the whole of the screen, and in fact coinciding with it, he invokes a phantasmatic projection, which cannot but flash in the (white) spectator's mind. In so doing, he holds up a mirror to his white audience, challenging it to confront its fantasy of the loathsome "Nigger," and to recognize its own moral corruption.

Baldwin's body at the end of *I Am Not Your Negro*, therefore, becomes a screen that provocatively invites a racialized projection onto itself, so as to reveal and reflect back the corrupt soul of white America. His body here is all at once material (the poised body sitting in the TV studio), televised (for how the TV camera frames it, frontally singling it out against the black backdrop, and bringing it to the sitting rooms of countless Americans), and filmic

(for how the film progressively constructs a discourse on corporeality that leads to this final moment). Similarly, Pier Paolo Pasolini's scandalous material and performing body in the installation *Intellettuale* turned into a screen that bore his own film like a cross — and not any film, but a rendition of the *Gospel*. In a photograph of the performance taken from behind Pasolini's back, which reverses the perspective, Pasolini looks literally transfixed by the ray of light coming from the projector, as a Christological sacrificial victim. His queer body, in *Intellettuale* as in some of his work, is thus the site of a scandalous identification with Christ.

In both Pasolini's and Baldwin's deployment of a corporeal identification, then, we can say that the author's body deliberately lends itself to become a "public locus of discourse," to use again Gordon's phrase on Pasolini's textual and, crucially for my argument, extra-textual strategies. Both Pasolini and Baldwin chose to incarnate their intellectual production, which is thus quite literally made flesh. Albeit distinctly, both used their bodies as the site of a scandalous identification/projection to bring to light unspoken moral and ideological evils in mainstream white/patriarchal/heternormative society. Several reviewers, however, have noted how Baldwin's queerness is mostly silenced in Peck's film, possibly in the name of a more efficient focus on his blackness and on the Civil Rights movement, thus creating only a partial image of his embodiment, and its relevance in and for his oeuvre. This is problematic since, as Michael L. Cobb has remarked, "[q]ueerness and blackness are closely aligned in Baldwin's eyes – and with that connection he upset traditional, religious history about blackness by founding the race through queer sexuality."[21] Yet, aside for the mention of a 1966 BFI memorandum commenting that Baldwin "may be a homosexual and he appeared as if he may be one," the film does not delve into the racial politics of his sexuality:

> The apparent desire to represent Baldwin as the quintessential Race Man — a public spokesman and leader of African Americans with ostensibly straight bonafides — goes against not only the principles of Baldwin's work, but also the reality of his fraught position in the civil-rights movement as a queer black man. […] viewers wouldn't know from the film's narrative slant how the experience of race and sexuality were closely intertwined for Baldwin.[22]

In a piece on "Queering *I Am Not Your Negro*," Robert J. Corber sets off from young Baldwin's queer identification with movie stars such as Bette Davis and Sylvia Sidney to

analyse his complex relationship with his gayness in his writing. Corber shows how, for many critics of the time, Baldwin's homosexuality undermined his credentials as a spokesperson for the Civil Rights movement. He cites a telling 1963 article published in *Time*, which described him as a "nervous, slight, almost fragile figure, filled with frets and fears," implying he was "not, by any stretch of the imagination, a Negro leader."[23] It is known that Baldwin started to give credit to the line that equated militancy and masculinity and, notoriously, he came close to endorsing homophobic views of homosexuality "as a white man's disease that robbed black men of their manhood."[24] Nevertheless, with reference to an interview by Baldwin with Richard Goldstein, Corber also shows that Baldwin's prose style "signified a repudiation of the dominant form of masculinity."[25] The passage is worth citing in full, because of its relevance for my argument on embodiment and projection:

> Baldwin suggested that men had invented the category of the faggot to protect themselves from the waywardness of their own desires. Because of the norms governing masculinity, men could never express or act on their homoerotic impulses without undermining their claims to manhood; therefore they projected their sexual fantasies onto other men. Baldwin remarked that the figure of the faggot allowed men "to act out a sexual fantasy on the body of another man and not take any responsibility for it", and he exhorted the homosexual to recognize "that he is a sexual target for other men, and that is why he is despised, and why he is called a faggot."[26]

Hence, Baldwin's lending of his body to the phantasmatic racial projection of the "Nigger" figure cannot be separated from the homophobic projection of the "faggot."

If Pasolini's foregrounding of his queer body in *Intellettuale* and elsewhere was narcissistically overlaid by a scandalous discourse of Christological sacrifice, however, Baldwin's stance in the sequence of *I Am Not Your Negro* that I singled out is not sacrificial. Instead, Baldwin's body gives itself to a range of possibilities, which exist all at once, and as alternatives: the historical, individualized, queer Black body; an ideological absence and a representational void; the resisting "Negro" body; and even the loathsome, repellent "Nigger." In so doing, Baldwin's image evokes a great many cultural and ideological tropes, while stubbornly resisting cultural appropriation, stereotyping, and victimization. Within the overall design of the film, then, this move counteracts any temptation to articulate resistance merely as an "injury discourse," and any impulse "to render historical events through metaphors about the body, preferably a body that is wounded."[27] While *I Am Not Your Negro*

is punctuated with wounded Black bodies, in his work, as reflected in the film too, Baldwin "vehemently opposes the recalcitrant acceptance of 'the divine right of suffering.'"[28] Although a figure, and indeed because it is a figure, Baldwin's body in *I Am Not Your Negro* is not a metaphor — as clearly indicated by the long series of frontal portraits of "real" Black people from both the past and the present looking deliberately into the camera lens, interpellating the spectator. Their images are presented just before the described closing sequence of the film, in which Baldwin also looks into the lens, and offers his body as an incarnate screen. As a result, they appear to be summoned by Baldwin's body and to repeat its gesture. To use Jean-Luc Nancy's words on Christ's resurrection and revelation, from the quote that opens this chapter: "Why then a body? Because only a body […] puts presence outside of itself; […] and, by that very fact, it brings others along with it."[29] Not a spirit, but a body of flesh only can reveal a presence. Oscillating between figure and man, Baldwin's filmic body in *I Am Not Your Negro* puts presence outside of itself, bringing the missing Black body along with it.

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**Notes**

[1] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 48.
[2] Giacinto Di Pietrantonio, "Fabio Mauri: No era nuevo," Fundación PROA Buenos Aires (2014), http://proa.org/esp/exhibition-fabio-mauri.php. My trans.
[3] Pier Paolo Pasolini and Oswald Stack, *Pasolini on Pasolini: Interviews with Oswald Stack* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 78.
[4] Pier Paolo Pasolini, "La crocifissione" (1948–49), in *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Walter Siti, vol. 1 (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), 467–8.
[5] John Di Stefano, "Picturing Pasolini: Notes From a Filmmaker's Scrapbook," *Art Journal* 56, no. 2 (1997): 20.
[6] Robert Gordon, *Pasolini: Forms of Subjectivity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 2–3.
[7] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), 60.
[8] Robert J. Corber, "Queering *I Am Not Your Negro*: or Why We Need James Baldwin More Than Ever," *James Baldwin Review* 3, no. 1 (2017): 162.
[9] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Vintage, 2011), 85.
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